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Hill Maria

Chapter VI

Villages, Houses and their Contents

A. Hill Maria Villages, Houses and their Contents

361 The site of the Hill Maria village is in these days almost entirely determined by its convenience as a centre from which to cultivate the *penda* slopes of the year. Peace has reigned in the Abujhmar hills from time immemorial, and no question of defence arises when a village is built. A possible relic of former unsettled times [349] is the custom of building stone cairns and seats as look-outs at the head of passes or the summits of hills on the paths leading to villages; but these are convenient watching places for herdsmen when their cattle are grazing around the hill-tops, and serve also to mark the line of the paths which, in the rains, are overgrown with rank grass, or fall into disuse when villages or *penda* slopes are abandoned for alternative sites. Certain well-defined tracks 487 through the hills are cleared annually by the villagers; these often avoid the actual village sites, to which side tracks connect them. There are no carts in the hills, and therefore the tracks are only foot-paths, generally wide enough only for a party to walk in single file, though at the periodic clearings the grass is cut down to a width of two or three feet on each side of the path. The village 361 boundary is usually marked by a cairn of stones, in the centre of which may be planted a pole ornamented at the top with bunches of grass or peacock or jungle-cock feathers, the pole being further adorned by peeling off bands of bark at intervals throughout its length. The boundary itself is usually a stream, and the cairns of the two villages are usually twenty or thirty yards apart, so that [783] when the annual *pira-mansha* (called by the Bison-horn Marias *rog-burria* and by Halbi-speakers *boharani*) ceremony of ridding the village of disease takes place, the old winnowing-fans with the sweepings of each house can be hung up beyond the boundary on this no-man's-land without leaving them on the lands of the neighbouring village.

487 These paths cross streams by stepping-stones, by logs felled across the stream, by small raised embankments pierced by hollowed 491 tree trunk pipes for the passage of the water and revetted with horizontally laid logs, or by bridges consisting of a plank supported by bamboo wicker-work cylinders filled with boulders resting on

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the bed of the stream; these are held in position between upright poles set V-wise in the boulders, to which are fastened horizontal bamboo poles as railings. As they have no saws, the 'plank' is a tree trunk with one side trimmed flat with the axe. Even more elaborate bridges are sometimes made at high levels over streams liable to flood, from tree-fork to tree-fork on opposite banks.

Though, as has been said above, agricultural conditions nowadays determine village sites, hill-tops or rocky slopes remain favourite sites, and become commoner as you penetrate farther into the Abujhmar hills. The traditional arrangement is a street some twenty-five yards wide between parallel lines of long-houses; at one end of the street is the *gotul-lon* or village dormitory, generally within a rounded bamboo fence, and sometimes in front of this dormitory will be seen the *udam-garia* or seat of honour of the *kasyeq-gaita* and possibly also of the secular headman (*gaita* or *peda*), as well as the stones on which the other village elders sit around with them in conclave; but the *udam-garia* custom is not found in all parts of the hills. Sometimes the shrine of the *Nar-Talughi* or Village Mother is actually inside the dormitory fencing, and she is often housed there for a while when a village is being shifted. There are, as a rule, no *bari* (vegetable gardens) attached to each house as amongst most Gonds, including the Bison-horn Marias and the Murias of Bastar; but sometimes the *kasyeq-gaita* has a small tobacco *bari* attached to the dormitory in the centre of the main street. The *Gazetteer* (p. 50) speaks of the 'common granary' as standing in the broad street; but with one partial exception, Nugur village in Kutru Mar in the Indrawati valley, I have never seen this. The villagers generally construct a row of granaries (*manda* or *wijja-dodi*) on piles at the side or rear of the main village street, sometimes nearer the *penda* fields than the village; this row can hardly be called a 'common granary', as each villager has his own granary in the row for his own private food and seed store, the granaries being built together only for convenience, as they can then be watched at night by one watchman for the whole village, sleeping in a special hut at the side of the granaries or under a granary. At Nugur there were big matting bins in the main street in which all the rice seed of the village was stored; but here the village had come under the economic thraldom of some Teli tradesmen, who for years had advanced rice to the cultivators. The bins were left in the collective charge of the headman and elders, and any villager could help himself to seed on the understanding that at harvest he would replace it with 50 per cent. interest, the Teli owners being also free to remove the surplus from time to time.

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that there was no custom of segregating menstruating girls or women.

There is in every Bison-horn village a *paik-gotul* or lodging-hut for State officials, but I have never seen a *gotul-lon* dormitory for bachelors. I was once told that there are such dormitories in a few big villages such as Ghotpal, Karli, Tumnar, Massenar and Dugeli, but could not find one in these villages; nor did the State officials who gathered information for me in various parts of the Bison-horn country ever report their existence. The *padas* (headmen) and *permas* (village priests) whom I saw at Aranpur and other camps stated that such dormitories were a degraded institution found only among Hill Marias and Murias. They are not mentioned by Madras writers on the Koyas and Dorlas.

Bison-horn villages are not found on the tops of hills and isolated spurs like Hill Maria villages. They are located in positions convenient for communications, water supply or cultivation, like lowland villages in all countries. Many of them, especially in the Jagdalpur tahsil, have cart tracks leading to them, though these are used mainly by the Hindu and Mohammedan traders who bring their wares to the various weekly markets already established in their bigger villages. Though, however, some Bison-horn Marias have carts, and more keep cattle and do not always leave it to the Rawat herdsman servant to milk them, while many use ploughs, yet the majority of them still think it not the thing for Koitor to drive carts, or that they could never manage them; and there are, therefore, very many villages approachable only by footpaths. They make bridges very similar to those of the Hill Marias, often on a more elaborate scale.

Shifting villages

The only Bison-horn Maria village where I could find memory of a fairly recent shifting was Bare Gudra, in the Kuakonda *pargana* of Dantewara tahsil. My informant was Kartami Mukka, the old village priest (*perma*) of the village, who said that when he was young the village was settled in the now abandoned Mundi *padar* (village site); there was heavy mortality from epidemic and epizootic outbreaks for some years, and a series of crop failures. Then the eggs in his father's house began always to get addled, and his father, the *perma*, interpreting this as a final intimation that the village had to be shifted, called up the elders to see the eggs, and they agreed that the village must be shifted. They had then, on a Monday, Wednesday or Friday, to go at noon with the *perma* to select the *padar* for the new village; and to test the omens at the new *padar* the *perma* dug a small hole in the ground. In the first hole he found a root growing across the hole, and so changed to another position